

SOMETHING'S UP AT SUTTON



"6,496, 6,497...no...wait, where was I?"
—Phil Gravel, Sutton's official tree-counter.

After more than half a century, the Boulanger family is passing the torch.

BY IAN MERRINGER ► PHOTOS SEBASTIEN LAROSE

Drivers will find much to distract them as they travel south around Lac Brome in Quebec's Eastern Townships. Out every window there's a peak with ski runs snaking down it. There's Bromont to the west, Orford to the northeast, Owl's Head and Jay Peak to the southeast and Mont Sutton straight ahead.

With four pair of skis on our roof rack, it seemed like we were in just the right place. That notion melted away when the convertible passed

us on the left. The convertible was converted, as in top down, with the driver's thin hair (always seems to be the case) blowing in the warm wind.

March was the proverbial nail in the coffin for Quebec's winter of 2016. Eastern North America's scant snow cover had already given up its hold on the forest floor and last autumn's leaves were now blowing about ominously.

If there's someone out there capable of cancelling a ski trip because of suspect conditions, I'd like to meet him. I knew I didn't have it in me

to pull the plug. Sutton is reasonably high (840 metres) and mostly north-facing. The whole of the East was suffering, but it could always snow before our departure. Onward family.

Beyond mere optimism, this trip would be fuelled by nostalgia. Mont Sutton was the destination for my family's March breaks back when I rode in the back seat of the station wagon for the seven-hour drive from Toronto. I was looking forward to finding the same sneaky routes through the trees between runs, taking evening joy rides

on the ski bikes that the liftees used for shift changes and to see if I could still hold my tuck all the way down Alleghany (although now I'm wondering if I ever could).

On the title deed, this would not be the same Mont Sutton I knew as a pre-teen. A week before our arrival, majority shareholders in the founding Boulanger family had sold the mountain to three new owners. This was no foreign investment firm taking over—all three individuals have ties to Sutton—but for a ski area run by one family for more than half a century, it was big news.

As if serving as a totem of continuity, one of the first people I see milling around the base upon arrival is Christine Boulanger, daughter of a co-founder and a long-time part owner and operator of the mountain. I remember her from a visit 13 years ago when she was communications director. Now she is just a skier waiting for a friend, while her PR skills remain intact. There's no betrayal of disappointment or regret about the sale, no sign of concern about the future direction of a resort that was, to an extent, literally carved from the wilderness by her father.

Instead she's happy to recount one more time how her father Réal Boulanger spent day after day walking the hill above us in the early 1960s, dreaming, then planning, then chopping to bring Mont Sutton into being.

Boulanger and his brother weren't bakers, they were butter churners, but the family creamery wasn't busy in the winter. Réal got ambitious about the mountain where his family had been bush skiing for the past 15 years and (partially) cut dozens of ski runs through the mature birch and maple trees.

"He walked the mountain and played with every slope a million times before he cut them so they would follow the best route down the fall line," says the younger Boulanger. Wherever the fall line led, Réal followed. The eventual result was a labyrinthine network of 63 trails that intersect with each other so many times there are fully 200 junctions to navigate. It's a mid-size mountain that seems huge.

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As central to Sutton as its layout is its hardwood canopy, Réal's approach was not to clear-cut wide boulevards but to gently coax ski runs from the woods. He left in place plenty of trees. To this day they serve to give Mont Sutton's famous *sous bois* trails; a texture and rhythm that's found only in patches at other resorts.

To hear any of the Sutton faithful tell it, those first autumns that Réal spent in the hills above town created something special that still separates it from its competitors in Quebec and Vermont.

But that was a long time ago. Sutton had remained remarkably true to my happy childhood memories of it, which I saw as a good thing, but for a reminder of the improvements that can come with new ownership we only had to check in down the road at Hotel Horizon.

Mont Sutton has no on-hill, hotel-style accommodations, which is why the rebirth of Hotel Horizon is so important. Located two km from the base, I recall the hotel as somewhat rundown 25 years ago. But new owners bought the hotel in the summer of 2015 and overhauled it. The hallways remain frill-free cinder-block walls, but the paint is fresh and the doorways open into 24 compact but freshly renovated, tidy and well-appointed rooms.

There's no kitschy ski chalet charm to find, but plenty of Scandinavian-modernism. My wife liked the uncluttered feel (until we unpacked), the kids (aged six and seven) agreed that the rooms would serve just fine

as change rooms to slip into bathing suits because they were on their way to the pool and would probably be late for dinner, thank you very much.

Being late for dinner proved to be a mistake. The entire west wall of the second-floor dining room is windows through which diners can watch the sun set over the rolling Eastern Townships below. As the plates come and go, it's clear that it's not just clean blond wood in the rooms and the faint and welcome smell of chlorine in the hall that the new Hotel Horizon has to offer. Dinners strike the right balance between filling and fancy, and the breakfasts are worth missing first tracks for. Another waffle then, before prodding the kids inch by inch toward their lessons, which would allow me to meet with Jean-Michel Ryan, the public face of the new owners.

Ryan has been general manager of Sutton for a decade. His two partners are both businessmen, local property owners and Sutton regulars. Ryan's connection to Sutton is some reassurance of continuity, but talk around the hill in the wake of the announcement seems to be more about the

credentials of one of his partners. Sylvan Gervais is CEO of a company that deals in industrial compressors. Improved snowmaking is on everyone's mind this El Niño year.

Sutton would later announce an investment of a half-million dollars in snowmaking equipment for the 2017-18 season, including 50 new snowguns, but on this day in March, Ryan is downplaying expectations of an upheaval.

"We want to improve the functional aspect," says Ryan. That includes overhauling the main chalet with a new layout and some new services, but don't expect anyone to rip out the aged wood panelling lining the walls. "We want to keep the same spirit. Bromont and Orford are closer to the highways, so we have to be different here to attract skiers."

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"How do you talk about plans for something that you want to keep mostly the same?" Ryan asks in answer to my question about specific plans. He says they chose the hill because they liked what it had to offer, not because they thought it would be much better if it were radically different.

We wrap up our chat, with Ryan noting upgraded snowmaking and chairlift networks are prime objectives, and I click into my skis, glide through the empty corral and settle back into Chair II. When it was installed in the 1980s, it was the first high-speed quad I had ever ridden, I thought I was flying. If it still seems fast, it's only because it's still the only high-speed lift at Sutton.

This fact doesn't bother Bob Harvey, the only guy in the lift line I could find to ride with. He's



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In the Townships even snowboarders think skiers are cooler.



from Montreal but has skied here since 1967, hunkering down in one of the original cabins built in 1962. When I ask him if he hopes the new ownership will retire any of Sutton's distinctive, centre-pole, double chairlifts he deflects: "The lifts don't bother me. There's never a traffic jam of more than five or six minutes at the worst."

As a 50-year veteran of the mountain, Harvey isn't opposed to a fresh infusion of cash. "They need to upgrade for sure. Spice it up," he adds, pointing out that the area needs more vacation rentals. "It's a dream to think you can have a mountain and not develop it."

Harvey would probably welcome the recent October announcement showing that the owners are now talking about more changes than Ryan revealed back in March. They've earmarked a quarter-million dollars for an "in-depth analysis of potential diversification opportunities" and a real-estate development plan. The end goal, like almost every other ski area, is to create a "four-season tourist destination."

Back at the bottom of Chair II, my children, now sprung from their lessons, have found a patch of the cleanest, freshest snow I've seen in weeks. But it's not staying white. Paul Boivin is pouring lines of thick, sticky maple taffy all over it.

Sugarman Boivin started skiing at Sutton as a boy, walking to the hill with his skis from the trailer where he lived near Chair I on a road that has since been named for his family. He claims to be the first Quebecer to finish in the top 10 of a World Cup downhill, finishing ninth at Val Gardena in 1983. His 223-cm downhill skis are there behind him in the shack he's set up at the base, selling taffy and syrup.

He concedes there's a lot of money that could usefully be put into Sutton, again with the snowmaking, but says that more important than anything that has to do with equipment, other activities and accommodation is preserving the natural feel of how the slopes, snow and trees all come together.

"For sure, there's nothing that compares to it in the East," he says. "The way Réal incorporated terrain, and left trees in place, the trails here are incredible."

The downhiller-turned-purveyor-of-sweets seems to be over his need for speed and wide boulevards. "Sutton is simply the most beautiful mountain. You don't rush going down a hill here. You enjoy it. You savour every turn." With that he pours another line of taffy. He says he thinks Sutton is in the hands of the right people. "Time will tell." ☞

More info: montsutton.com
And to search even more lodging options around Sutton: eastertownships.org



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